

Rivers, Dams and Fish: Water in California – a tribal perspective

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If we were able to fly over northern California in the years prior to the gold rush, we would see a healthy vibrant land, filled with villages inhabited by tribal peoples. The rivers teemed with fish, beaver ponds dispersed water all summer long and natural lakes were full of cold, clean, clear water, so pure that you could drink directly from the waterways in which it flowed. As you flew farther south, the rivers grew larger and joined together as they merged into the great Delta of the state where the fresh water married the salty water of the sea, providing a transition place for spawning fish to acclimate from salt water to fresh and then back again as they returned as children back to the ocean.

As you pass the Delta and continue your flight south, the green hills and forestlands diminish and the ground becomes arid as the desert reaches of the state come into view. Plant, animal and human habitation changes as the area itself causes an adaptation to the climate and locale... living in harmony with place was the lifeway of the people and of the relatives who came before.

The rivers of the state of California changed dramatically as the first peoples lost control of the landscape of the state. Where once stood big trees that brought water up from the earth, providing shade and shelter, big cities sprawl out in all directions bringing poor air quality and climate controlled shelter. A controlled climate, different from that of long ago, has reduced the inhabitant's ability to withstand cold or hot temperatures, as the thermostat is now a constant 72 degrees.

Where once clear, cold water rushed by constrained only by stream banks and natural flow, concrete channels now sit, and the water never sees the earth or has the chance to cleanse itself. The channels provide for no natural percolation and little time for the plants and trees to absorb and release water from their roots. The rivers of the state have been affected: they have been the victim of an assault that began in the 1840s and 50's because the miners used monitors to flush gold from the riverbanks and hillsides choking the life from the land and the water with floods of mud and silt. To mitigate the flooding and destruction caused the State passed laws designed to control nature while allowing man to hold dominion over everything.

Those same practices caused the state to further the abuse by allowing the Doctrine of Prior Appropriation to come into play rather than the Riparian Doctrine of English common law that allowed for water use, but always with an eye for the welfare of your neighbor- not a competition with them. In California, this competition has taken its toll on water reliability. We have seen levees built that stopped the natural meander of the rivers and led to the now famous canals and water project channels that move water from place to place with little or no regard for the places

in between. The engineers who built these water projects forgot the needs of the land, discounted the amounts of water needed in each place and forgot that the water must be allowed to flow to the ocean.

Getting back to the flight along the waterways, we see over 1200 dams on the state's rivers, countless reservoirs and fabricated lakes holding back the waters for "the good of all", but the reality is that the water is sick and needs to run free. You cannot see that from the sky, you have to be on the ground and look for all the symptoms that this sick patient exhibits.

The land has become toxic from the buildup and release of natural salts and minerals that composed the great inland seas that once covered much of this state (as well as the manmade chemicals that have been spread on the land to make the desert into an oasis, a great Garden of Eden here in the west). This has been caused by the flooding of areas over and over with fresh water that has leached the minerals out of the soil and back onto the surface in a never ending cycle of reuse and misuse; never allowing the land to lie fallow to heal itself. Did anyone stop to think that deserts were created to be deserts and not oasis?

The rivers have become stagnate, because they are unable to meander and flow as they once did, changing course and direction at the will of the water; instead, they now follow one path created by man that has stymied the natural action and confined it to a place with no outlet except directly back to the sea. The water no longer has the option of seeping back into the earth to cleanse itself before moving back to the surface to care for other areas of the earth. Much like a tourniquet on an arm, the water has been restricted in its flow and stagnates, becoming toxic as it sits, held in check in one place for too long.

When we talk of rivers today, depending on where in the state you are, you will describe a vast waterway, a dry streambed, a smaller creek or a concrete channel. The problem of the state's waterworks is that there are no "true" rivers, only things controlled by man with levees, dams and canals. People of the state clamor for more water but I wonder how many after a big rain watch the waters rush headlong to the sea in the channels and think: what if we had less concrete and more natural waterways, would we be able to keep some of this in the ground, recharging the base water? I doubt if many think of this idea.

We all now see the small numbers of fish that once thrived in the rivers. Dams have stopped them from returning to their natural home waters, denying them access to spawning grounds needed for reproduction. Hatcheries were created to mitigate the loss of streams up from the dams but the fish that are raised in these "farms" are becoming weak and unable to survive the journey back to the sea where they are no longer able to grow and return home. Man tries to emulate spawning grounds but does not realize that it takes certain rocks and actions to allow those rocks the chance to become rounded and smooth so the fish can use them. Why does man think that he knows all there is to know? Can we take a minute to observe what is needed without determining a solution for all, based on the circumstances that relate to only a few? In

addition, why will not people see the connectedness of all things to make a greater picture? In the rivers and streams, each thing, from the smallest bug to the largest fish interacts on the other in a symbiotic manner. If we remove one piece from this puzzle, we will not see the original picture – it will change, just as we have caused change already.

We need to rethink dams: here is a thought, what if dams were drained every 5 to 10 years and then let to run free for 5 to 10 years. Alternate this practice for the 1200 dams in the state and see what would happen. What would happen if beaver dam ponds were allowed again without interference to bring back the health of rivers, streams and watersheds? Soils, trees, plants and all life would again bring water for all. What would happen if people again believed that trees bring water from the great oceans under the earth? The Winnemem believe that the water spirit is out of balance and will bring a great change to this life created artificially by man. The water spirits will teach man a lesson if he is unwilling to change for the better and let go of his greed.

Dams, Fish, and Rivers...Rivers, Fish and Dams...Fish, Rivers and Dams: no matter what order one says the words, one word stands out as out of place. From a tribal perspective, dams do not fit when looking for healthy fish or rivers. From a tribal perspective, we all should look at how better to generate energy, how better to conserve the water we have and how better to care for our rivers and fish. Together, we can make sure the pieces fit and the picture that once was returns to view.